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In this screenshot provided on March 7, 2023, TikTok user Hazel Thayer speaks out in a TikTok video against an oil drilling project that's proposed on Alaska's North Slope.

Associated Press

TikTok push targets Biden on Alaska's huge Willow oil plan

By M. THIESSEN Associated Press
ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — A social media campaign urging President Joe Biden to reject an oil development project on Alaska's remote North Slope has rapidly gained steam on TikTok and other platforms, reflecting the unease many young Americans feel about climate change. The #StopWillow campaign has garnered more than 50 million views and counting, and was trending in the top 10 topics on TikTok, as users voiced their concerns that Biden wouldn't stick to his campaign promises to curtail oil drilling.

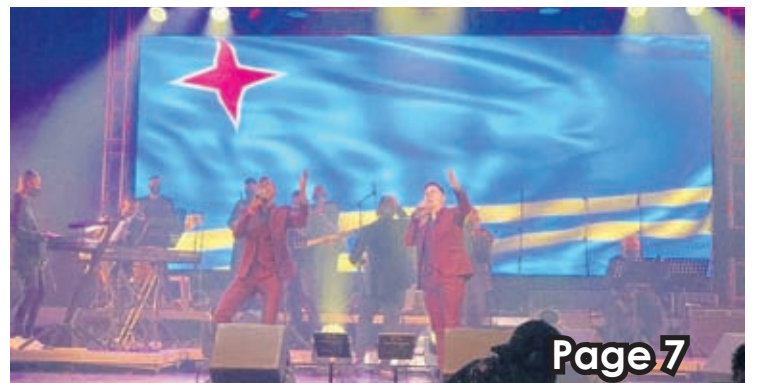
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Sea turtle conservation by Turtugaruba Foundation



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Festival "A Song for Aruba's hymn and flag" begins this Friday



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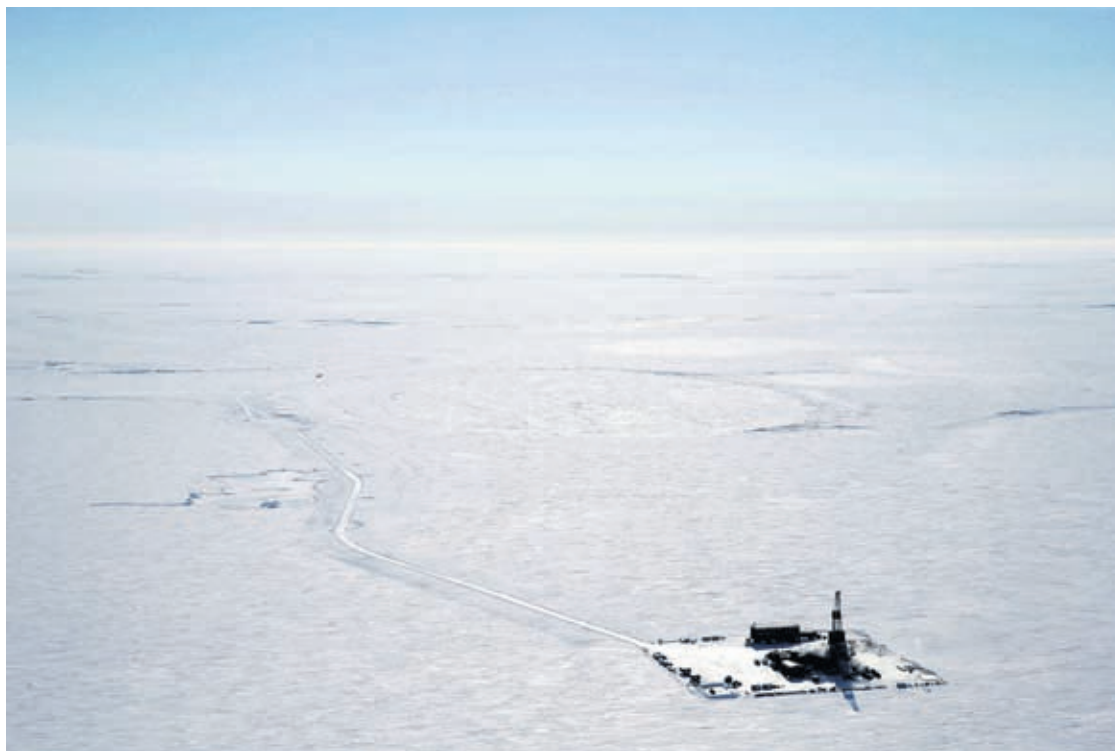
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TikTok push targets Biden on Alaska's huge Willow oil plan

From Front

"It's just so blatantly bad for the planet," said Hazel Thayer, a climate activist who posted TikTok videos using the #StopWillow hashtag.

"With all of the progress that the U.S. government has made on climate change, it now feels like they're turning their backs by allowing Willow to go through," Thayer said. "I think a lot of young people are feeling a little bit betrayed by that." At the same time, Alaska Native leaders with ties to the petroleum-rich North Slope support ConocoPhillips Alaska's proposed Willow project. They've pushed back, saying the Willow Project would bring much-needed jobs and billions of dollars in taxes and mitigation funds to the vast, snow- and ice-covered region nearly 600 miles (965 kilometers) from Anchorage. The Alaska Native mayors of two North Slope communities — Asisaun Toovak, of Utqiagvik, the nation's northernmost community formerly known as Barrow, and Chester Ekak, of Wainwright, about 90 miles (144 kilometers) to the southwest — penned an opinion piece for the Anchorage Daily News in support of the project. In the debate, "the voices of the people whose an-



This 2019 aerial photo provided by ConocoPhillips shows an exploratory drilling camp at the proposed site of the Willow oil project on Alaska's North Slope.

Associated Press

cestral homeland is most impacted have largely been ignored," they wrote. "We know our lands and our communities better than anyone, and we know that resource development and our subsistence way of life are not mutually exclusive." Biden's decision on Willow will be one of his most consequential climate decisions. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, who fought the Willow project as a member of Congress, has the final decision on whether to approve it, although top White

House climate officials are likely to be involved, with input from Biden himself. The White House declined to comment Tuesday. Climate activists are outraged that Biden appears open to the project, which they call a "carbon bomb," and would risk alienating young voters who have urged stronger climate action by the White House as he approaches a 2024 reelection campaign. Willow's critics include the Pueblo Action Alliance, which is where Halaand's daughter, Somah Haaland, once worked. The Western

Energy Alliance, an oil industry trade organization, claims that creates a conflict of interest for the secretary. Interior spokesperson Melissa Schwartz denied any conflict. Alaska's congressional delegation — including Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola, who is the first Alaska Native to serve in Congress — backs the project and met with top officials at the White House last week. With a decision anticipated soon, attention to Willow is growing online. "Young voters felt like this was betraying the climate

goals they had set forth," said Tyler Steinhardt, a vice president at Pique Action, a company that produces social media and mini-documentaries about climate solutions.

The proposed Willow project is within the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, an area the size of Indiana, though about half of the reserve is off limits to oil and gas leasing under an Obama-era rule reinstated by the Biden administration last year.

It's also where subsistence hunters harvest caribou, seals, fish and bowhead whales to supplement extremely high food costs in rural Alaska, where for example a 24-ounce bag of shredded cheese can cost \$16.99.

ConocoPhillips Alaska said Willow, one of the biggest oil fields to be proposed in Alaska in decades, could produce up to 180,000 barrels of oil a day, or about 1.5% of the total U.S. oil production. It could also help fill the 800-mile (1,287-kilometer) trans-Alaska oil pipeline, which is running at about a fourth of the peak capacity in the 1980s, when more than 2 million barrels a day flowed through the line from the North Slope to Valdez for shipment. In oil-friendly Alaska, there have been visible shows of support for the project. □



Activists hold placards reading "Woman, Life, Freedom" with portraits of women who were killed in Iran, during a demonstration to mark the International Women's Day, in London, Wednesday, March 8, 2023.

Associated Press

By **FATIMA HUSSEIN**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. is imposing more sanctions on Iran, hitting people

and firms accused of violating women's rights during nationwide anti-government protests over the treatment of young wom-

U.S. sanctions Iranian officials over women's right abuses

en and girls. Included in the sanctions are two prison officials, several firms that manufacture equipment for Iranian law enforcement, the commander in chief of the Iranian army and others. Nationwide protests first erupted over the Sept. 16 death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini while in the custody of Iran's morality police. She was accused of violating Iran's strict dress code for women by wearing her headscarf improperly. Those protests have continued for months. Sub-

sequently, a series of suspected poisonings at girls' schools across the country, which sickened hundreds of students, fueled claims about the violation of women and girls' rights and prompted protests. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement that the U.S. government "remains deeply concerned that Iranian authorities continue to suppress dissent and peaceful protest, including through mass arrests, sham trials, hasty executions, the detention of journalists, and

the use of sexual violence as a means of protest suppression."

Brian Nelson, Treasury's under secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, said in a statement that Iran's government "treats women as second-class citizens and attempts to suppress their voices by any means."

"We will continue to take action against the regime, which perpetuates abuse and violence against its own citizens — especially women and girls," Nelson said. □

U.S. to relax COVID testing rules for travelers from China

By AAMER MADHANI and
ZEKE MILLER

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is preparing to relax COVID-19 testing restrictions for travelers from China as soon as Friday, according to two people familiar with the decision.

The people, who were not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the administration has decided to roll back the testing requirements as cases, hospitalizations and deaths are declining in China and the U.S. has gathered better information about the surge.

The restrictions were put in place on Dec. 28 and took effect on Jan. 5 amid a surge in infections in China after the nation sharply eased pandemic restrictions and as U.S. health officials expressed concerns that their Chinese counterparts were not being truthful to the world about the true number of infections and deaths. The Washington Post was first to report on Tuesday about the expected administration move.

At the time, U.S. officials also said the restriction



Residents wait to cross a road near members of the Chaoyang militia on duty in Beijing, Monday, March 6, 2023.

Associated Press

was necessary to protect U.S. citizens and communities because there was a lack of transparency from the Chinese government about the size of the surge or the variants that were circulating within China.

As part of its response, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention earlier this year expanded genomic surveillance at several U.S. airports, collecting voluntary samples from passengers aboard hundreds of

weekly flights from China, and the testing of wastewater aboard airplanes. The Traveler-based Genomic Surveillance Program will continue to monitor travelers from China and more than 30 other countries.

The rules imposed in January require travelers to the U.S. from China, Hong Kong and Macau to take a COVID-19 test no more than two days before travel and provide a negative test before boarding their flight. The

testing applies to anyone 2 years and older, including U.S. citizens.

It also applied to people traveling from China via a third country and to people connecting through the U.S. as they go on to other destinations.

Anyone testing positive more than 10 days before the flight can provide documentation showing they've recovered from COVID-19 instead of a negative test result.

It has been left to the airlines to confirm negative tests and documentation of recovery before passengers board.

China saw infections and deaths surge after it eased back from its "zero COVID" strategy in early December after rare public protests against a policy that confined millions of people to their homes and sparked protests and demands for President Xi Jinping to resign.

But as China eased its strict rules, infections and deaths surged, and parts of the country for weeks saw their hospitals overwhelmed by infected patients looking for help.

Still, the Chinese government has been slow to release data on the number of deaths and infections.

The U.S. decision to lift restrictions comes at a moment when U.S.-China relations are strained. Biden ordered a Chinese spy balloon shot down last month after it traversed the continental United States. The Biden administration has also publicized U.S. intelligence findings that raise concern Beijing is weighing providing Russia weaponry for its ongoing war on Ukraine. □

White House, states tackle 'junk fees' that cost consumers

By FATIMA HUSSEIN

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House brought together state lawmakers, federal officials and others Wednesday to trade ideas about how to fight "junk fees" that inflate the cost to consumers of everything from hospital visits and airline tickets to student loans and concert seats.

The virtual meeting comes after President Joe Biden said in February that his administration would work with state and local officials to identify ways to crack down on such fees.

A Government Accountability Office report from 2018 on event ticket sales found that primary ticket providers charged fees averaging 27% of a ticket's

price.

The director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Rohit Chopra, encouraged state lawmakers to use consumer protection laws already on the books.

"States can enforce a prohibition on certain abusive acts or practices," Chopra said.

"These words might seem like obscure legal concepts, but they're really

about making sure there's fair market dealing that prices are upfront and clearly disclosed, but also that consumers have a chance to avoid those fees if they don't actually want that service."

The bureau is the nation's financial watchdog agency and was created in 2011 after the Great Recession. Lael Brainard, who recently took the helm of the National Economic Council after serving as vice chair of the Federal Reserve, said a lack of transparency in pricing is bad for businesses and consumers because it encourages companies in the same industries to begin to hide fees in order to compete and creates a "race to the bottom."

"Excessive fees hurt the

companies that want to be good actors and that want to price transparently," she said.

State lawmakers on the call shared examples of how they pursued efforts to eliminate specific junk fees. Democratic state Sen. James Skoufis of New York talked about how he worked on legislation that eliminated junk fees in live entertainment ticketing by banning delivery charges on tickets that are emailed and profiting from tickets that were originally issued for free.

"There's a lot more work to be done in this space," Skoufis said.

The administration is pursuing elimination of added fees across the federal government. □



President Joe Biden announces his administration's plans to eliminate junk fees for consumers, Oct. 26, 2022, in the South Court Auditorium on the White House campus in Washington.

Associated Press

New Mexico may curb paramilitaries near southern U.S. border

By **MORGAN LEE**

Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Legislators in New Mexico are advancing legislation to rein in paramilitary patrols that have popped up in recent years to halt migrants near the international border with Mexico and at a protest over a statue of a Spanish conquistador.

The bill places New Mexico among several states weighing changes this year to restrictions on paramilitary organizations.

Lawmakers in Oregon and Vermont also are considering initiatives aimed at limiting activities by private militarized groups. Legislators in Idaho are moving in the other direction by advancing a bill to repeal a state law banning private militias, despite criticism that the move could dangerously embolden existing paramilitary groups in the region. A narrow ban on municipal-run paramilitary groups would remain in place.

Democratic state Rep. Raymundo Lara of Sunland Park is cosponsoring the New Mexico initiative and says it gives district attorneys new tools and discretion by making it a crime for armed paramilitary organizations to engage in public patrols capable of causing



Albuquerque police detain members of the New Mexico Civil Guard, an armed civilian group, June 15, 2020, in Albuquerque, N.M.

Associated Press

injury or death with provisions regarding intimidation. The bill includes felony penalties including prison. The bill emerged Monday from House committee vetting for a possible floor vote, with the backing of Democrats. Republican House legislators have raised concerns that the proposal could interfere with neighborhood-watch style groups that respond to crime or limit opportunities for businesses in New Mexico that have provided tactical training to visiting security forces.

Lara said the proposal doesn't interfere with pri-

ivate firearms training or New Mexico's relatively permissive gun laws that allow both open carry of firearms and concealed handguns with permit and training requirements.

"That's going to be up to the district attorney, whether they do an investigation ... (to) find out if they are connected in any way, if there's some kind of command structure," he said.

Lara said the proposal responds to incidents in 2019 in which armed members of the United Constitutional Patriots stopped migrants near the international border in southernmost New

Mexico at Sunland Park, and in 2020 when men with long guns and tactical equipment showed up at a chaotic protest in Albuquerque about a statute of early Spanish settler Juan de Oñate, who is both revered and reviled.

The armed group in Albuquerque known as the New Mexico Civil Guard was recently barred by a state district court judge from publicly acting as a military unit without authorization. James Grayson, a chief deputy state attorney general who previously worked on the case against the New Mexico Civil Guard,

told legislators this week that prosecutors don't have adequate tools to address militarized groups that can pose a danger to public protesters and authorized law enforcement.

The bill from Lara defines a paramilitary organization as a group of three or more people with a command structure aimed at functioning in public as a combat, enforcement or security unit. Banned paramilitary activities also include interfering with government operations or a government proceeding and actions that deprive others of their rights. Paramilitary groups also would be prohibited from posturing deceptively as peace officers.

At Sunland Park, the United Constitutional Patriots were eventually pressured into leaving by local law enforcement amid accusations of trespassing on railroad property. One member of the group was convicted of impersonating a federal officer, while another was convicted on federal firearms charges.

Armed civilian groups have been an intermittent presence on the border for years, portraying themselves as auxiliaries to the U.S. Border Patrol and operating in areas where agents are not stationed. □

Boston council passes proposal aimed at tackling rising rent

BOSTON (AP) — The Boston City Council on Wednesday overwhelmingly approved a proposal from the mayor to cap rent prices as part of an effort to address rising housing costs and

prevent homelessness. Under Mayor Michelle Wu's proposal, known as a home rule petition, the maximum allowable annual rent increase would be based on the change in the con-

sumer price index, plus 6%, or a maximum increase of 10% whichever is lower. The measure also provides other rental protections, including requiring that evictions be for cause such as not paying rent.

"This is a monumental act for the City of Boston," said City Councilor Ricardo Arroyo, who supported the proposal. "I commend the mayor for moving forward with a rent stabilization plan to address what has been and is an ongoing, long standing issue of price gouging and rent gouging and displacement of residents of the City of Boston." Several council members said they were moved by earlier testimony from ten-

ants who were facing rent increases upwards of 100% in some neighborhoods. Many also spoke of getting calls from residents who complained about significant rent increases they can't afford and felt the proposal would be critical in giving them some stability.

According to the real estate company Zillow, the Boston metro area is the fifth most expensive metro area in the country. Typical rents in Boston have gone up over the past year by 8.1%.

"Boston is increasingly out of reach for a majority of our seniors, immigrant populations, families and individuals," City Councilor Ga-

briela Coletta said, adding that rents have increased 227% since 2011 in East Boston, which is part of her district. "Bad actors who take advantage of a bullish rental market can and do price gouge in a way that is displacing hard working individuals who just want to be able to live in this city and contribute to the local economy."

The proposal would also exempt owner-occupied properties with six units or fewer — including the three-family homes that dot the city's neighborhoods. Also exempt would be any new apartment buildings built during the first 15 years after being issued a certificate of occupancy. □



Tenants' rights advocates demonstrate in front of the Edward W. Brooke Courthouse on Jan. 13, 2021, in Boston.

Associated Press

Xi accuses U.S. of trying to block China's development

By JOE McDONALD

BEIJING (AP) — Is the United States out to sabotage China? Chinese leaders think so.

President Xi Jinping accused Washington this week of trying to isolate his country and hold back its development. That reflects the ruling Communist Party's growing frustration that its pursuit of prosperity and global influence is threatened by U.S. restrictions on access to technology, its support for Taiwan and other moves seen by Beijing as hostile.

Xi, China's most powerful leader in decades, tries to appear to be above problems and usually makes blandly positive public comments. That made his complaint Monday all the more striking. Xi said a U.S.-led campaign of "containment and suppression" of China has "brought unprecedented, severe challenges." He called on the public to "dare to fight."

On Tuesday, Foreign Minister Qin Gang sharpened the warning, saying Washington faces possible "conflict and confrontation" if it fails to change course.

"The foreign minister is speaking on behalf of a widely held view that the United States is coming after China and they have to defend themselves," said John Delury, an international relations specialist at Yonsei University in Seoul.

China is hardly the only government to fume at Washington's dominance of global strategic and economic affairs. But Chinese leaders see the United States as making extra effort to thwart Beijing as a challenger for regional and possibly global leadership. The ruling party wants to restore China's historic role as a political and cultural leader, raise incomes by transforming the country into an inventor of technology, and unite what it considers the Chinese motherland by taking control of Taiwan, the self-ruled island democracy that Beijing claims as part of its territory. Beijing sees those as positive goals, but American of-



U.S. President Joe Biden, right, stands with Chinese President Xi Jinping before a meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit meeting on Nov. 14, 2022, in Bali, Indonesia.

Associated Press

ficials see them as threats. They say Chinese development plans are based at least in part on stealing or pressuring foreign companies to hand over technology. Some warn Chinese competition might erode U.S. industrial dominance and incomes.

Washington has set back Beijing's plans by putting Chinese companies including its first global tech brand, Huawei, on a blacklist that limits access to processor chips and other technology. That crippled Huawei's smartphone brand, once one of the world's biggest. American officials are lobbying European and other allies to avoid Huawei equipment when they upgrade phone networks. Washington cites security fears, but Beijing says that is an excuse to hurt its fledgling competitors. The two governments have the world's biggest trading relationship and common interests in combating climate change and other problems. But relations are strained over Taiwan, Beijing's treatment of Hong Kong and mostly Muslim ethnic minorities, and its refusal to criticize or isolate Russia for its invasion of Ukraine.

The official Chinese view has soured following an uptick when Xi met U.S. President Joe Biden in November in Indonesia, said

Shi Yinhong, an international relations specialist at Renmin University in Beijing. He noted that in the five months since then, Washington approved more weapons sales to Taiwan, criticized Beijing's stance on Ukraine and put more Chinese companies on export watchlists, all of which China saw as hostile.

Xi and Qin spoke in a "dramatic way" this week, but "the essence of what they said is China's long-term stance," Shi said. The leadership believes "the United States has implemented almost all around, drastic and desperate containment of China in all respects, especially in strategic and military fields."

"The risk of military conflict between China and the United States is getting bigger," Shi said. A State Department spokesperson, Ned Price, said Washington wants to "coexist responsibly" within the global trade and political system and denied the U.S. government wants to suppress China. "This is not about containing China. This is not about suppressing China. This is not about holding China back," Price said in Washington. "We want to have that constructive competition that is fair" and "doesn't veer into that conflict."

The United States formed a strategic group, the

Quad, with Japan, Australia and India in response to concern about China and its claim to vast tracts of sea that are busy shipping lanes. They insist the group doesn't focus on any one country, but its official statements are about territorial claims and other issues on which they have disputes with Beijing.

The latest change in tone follows acrimonious exchanges over a Chinese balloon that was shot down after passing over North America. Its electronics and other equipment are being examined by the FBI. Qin, the foreign minister is "trying to position China as a global force for moderation and for peace" in front of foreign audiences and say "it's the Americans who are blowing things out of proportion," Delury said. Xi's government is especially irritated by displays of support by American and other Western legislators for Taiwan, which split with China in 1949 after a civil war.

Taiwan never has been part of the People's Republic of China, but the Communist Party says the island of 22 million people must unite with the mainland, by force if necessary.

Washington is obligated by federal law to see that Taiwan has the weapons to defend itself and has sold it fighter jets and missiles. □

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Cuba tobacco farmers recuperate after ruinous Hurricane Ian

By **ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ**

Associated Press

SAN LUIS, Cuba (AP) — A neighbor lent him a house to dry leaves, and he had a little fertilizer saved, so he plucked up the courage to plant. Now, Hirochi Robaina can hardly believe the resulting miracle.

Robaina, one of the most recognized tobacco producers in Cuba, marvels as he walks through the intense green of plants that have grown more than a meter (three feet) high in the Pinar del Río region.

Six months after Hurricane Ian devastated 80% of the region's tobacco infrastructure, farmers are trying to recuperate from the disaster. And though they'll produce less than in past seasons, they say they'll still be able to harvest the leaves for premium hand-rolled cigars, one of the Caribbean nation's key exports.

"Not a single tobacco house was left standing. There were no warehouses, there was no tree left," Robaina told The Associated Press, remembering how the storm left the region at the end of September. "Everything broke and at that moment I did not believe it was possible to plant."

Robaina, 46, is heir to a grandfather's estate that



Norma Toledo works on a tobacco farm at kilometer 7 in La Coloma community in Pinar del Río, Cuba, Tuesday, Feb. 28, 2023.

is so famous that a cigar brand bears his name: Vegas Robaina. At the beginning of October, Robaina was resigned to planting only beans and vegetables something, at least, but a waste for land that can produce some of the finest export tobacco.

But then he changed his mind and decided to try planting tobacco "to maintain the family tradition of a century," he said, showing his tobacco over two hectares (about 5 acres) or about 30% of what he had at this time in 2022.

Ian's impact added to an already intense economic

crisis in Cuba, where the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) dropped 11% in 2020. Many farmers don't remember ever having lived through the kind of destruction brought by the hurricane. In the fall, they had doubted they would even be able to plant any tobacco this season. It requires special care, application of fertilizers at precise moments, irrigation, cloth to cover the plants and drying houses for the leaves.

With winds of more than 200 kilometers per hour (125 miles per hour), Ian crossed the island from south to

north to the west, devastating the Pinar del Río region where 80% of the island's tobacco is produced including almost all of its tobacco for export.

Five people in Cuba died overall and 30,000 were evacuated.

Thousands of utility poles fell. Entire communities were without electricity, water, and telephones for weeks. Rice, corn, sweet potato and fruit crops were destroyed.

Some 10,000 tobacco drying houses were toppled. About 33,000 tons of stored leaves were lost, according to authorities.

Private tobacco producers have been meeting with authorities since last fall to secure commitments for the state to help settle debts and pay for materials to rebuild tobacco drying houses. Help also has come from fellow tobacco producing nations Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, and producers also chipped in to help each other.

Reinier Rojas, a 33-year-old farmer who has been cultivating premium tobacco for ten years, planted 13 hectares (about 30 acres) around La Coloma thanks to the fact that he was able to finish his drying houses.

"The recovery was quick," Rojas said. Rojas got seeds from a colleague to plant. Robaina received four chainsaws from producer friends from other countries and his cousin lent him the drying house, while he loaned some fertile land to two other farmers.

Nature also helped by withholding plagues of caterpillars or fungi, so demand for pesticides was low.

A tobacco house costs a producer around \$20,000 at the official exchange rate. A good harvest, with the delicate work of a whole year, can pay a farming family up to \$50,000 dollars, farmers told the AP. □

Associated Press

U.S. defense chief: Egypt ties an 'essential pillar' in region

CAIRO (AP) — U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Wednesday that America's defense partnership with Egypt is an "essential pillar" of Washington's commitment to the Middle East.

Austin made the remark on Twitter after touching down in Cairo on the latest leg of his Middle East tour. He was greeted by senior Egyptian military officials at the Cairo airport.

After landing, Austin held talks with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi and other high-ranking officials.

According to a statement issued by Egypt's presidential spokesperson, el-Sissi and Austin discussed various issues, including military

cooperation and surging violence in the Palestinian territories. Few further details about the meeting were given.

Austin was expected to depart Cairo for Israel later Wednesday. His previous stops on the tour included Jordan and Iraq. He was in



United States Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin reads a statement following a NATO defense ministers meeting at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Wednesday, Feb. 15, 2023.

Associated Press

Baghdad on Tuesday on an unannounced visit, days before the 20th anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein.

Egypt is one of the largest recipients in the Mideast of American economic and military aid and an abiding U.S. ally in the region. But in recent years, U.S. lawmakers have sought to condition that aid on human rights improvements and reforms.

Since coming to power in 2013, el-Sissi's government has overseen a wide-ranging crackdown on dissent, jailing thousands. Officials have targeted not only Islamist political opponents but also pro-democracy activists, journalists and on-

line critics.

"The U.S.-Egypt defense partnership is an essential pillar of our commitment to this region," Austin posted on Twitter. "I'm here to strengthen our coordination on key issues and to pursue opportunities to deepen our long-standing bilateral partnership with Egypt."

Egypt has also played a key role in brokering numerous cease-fire agreements between Israeli and Palestinian leaders over recent years. Austin's trip comes as violence has surged across the occupied West Bank to its highest levels in years. Austin was expected to meet with Israeli officials on Thursday. □

Festival “A Song for Aruba’s hymn and Flag” begins this Friday

(Oranjestad)—Festival “A Song for Aruba’s Hymn and Flag” (Un canto pa Aruba su Himno y Bandera) will take place this Friday, March 10th and Saturday, March 11th with the categories ‘kids’ and ‘teen’. The adult category will take place on March 12th.

This will be the 26th edition of the festival, which will take place on the Betico Croes Plaza in the down town area starting from 6pm. The festival will have 13 musical groups and 23 singers. The adult category is the community’s favorite.

The bands performing on Friday the 10th will be:

1. Beyond
2. Grupo di Amigo
3. Grupo Rejoice
4. Sabor Crioyo
5. Melodia
6. Curason pa Aruba
7. Alma Folklorico
8. Shine Music.

On Friday, the bands will be joined by 16 participants in the ‘kids’ category performing different genres, like the Aruban Waltz, Danza, Tumba, Polka, Calypso and Mazurka.

For March 11th, the arrangement for the bands is as follows:

1. Melodia
2. Grupo di Amigo
3. Alma Folklorico
4. Rincon Boyz
5. Aiwalos
6. Grupo Rejoice
7. Tipico Colegio Arubano
8. Carlito y su gang
9. Shine Music
10. Beyond
11. Sabor Crioyo.

On this day, there will be presentations from participants in the ‘teen’ category, all ranging from ages 10 to 12.



The Aruban delegation assists in the world’s biggest flight fair, ITB Berlin

(Oranjestad)—This week, different members from the A.T.A. team of Aruba and Europe, as well as AAA, AHATA and other associates in the tourist industry, are present in Berlin to assist at the flight fair ITB Berlin in person for the first time in 3 years.

ITB brings professionals from the flight world together and has the goal to give associates in the industry the opportunity to meet and strengthen their relationships, while at the same time opening doors for new associates.

In the course of the week, the team at A.T.A. will meet with different airlines like Ving, Aplitur and KLM. They will also meet with hotel representatives and tour operators in Europe, and with associates of AHATA in reference to the European market and the publicist of A.T.A. in Europe, DEPT.

The booth of Aruba will have representatives from 8 different hotels, tour operators and other local companies. This is a good indication that there is a market for this. 2023 includes challenges for this market, as well as opportunities.

British Airways

A key opportunity is the introduction of direct flight with British Airways starting March 26th. The goal is to

grow in the English market with 25.56% in 2023 compared to 2019.

Ving with non-stop flights from Sweden and focus continues on Switzerland. Ving will be operating a non-stop flight from Sweden to Aruba starting this October till March of 2024. This flight will also divert into the Norwegian market, which will create more opportunities for further diversification. It must be noted that necessary investigations regarding the strategy for the Swiss market have been finalized. This market is a part of the A.T.A. to investigate and possibly widen in 2023/2024, including due flights. This will be focused on during ITB.

The European market closed 2022 with a recovery rate of 95% compared to 2019, and the goal is to further grow this year. In January, 98,942 stay-over visitors arrived on Aruba. Amongst them, 6,562 visitors were European. The 3 markets that delivered the most visitors from Europe were The Netherlands, Sweden and Germany. The biggest airline from Europe was KLM, which had 3.0% of the total visitors in January 2023.

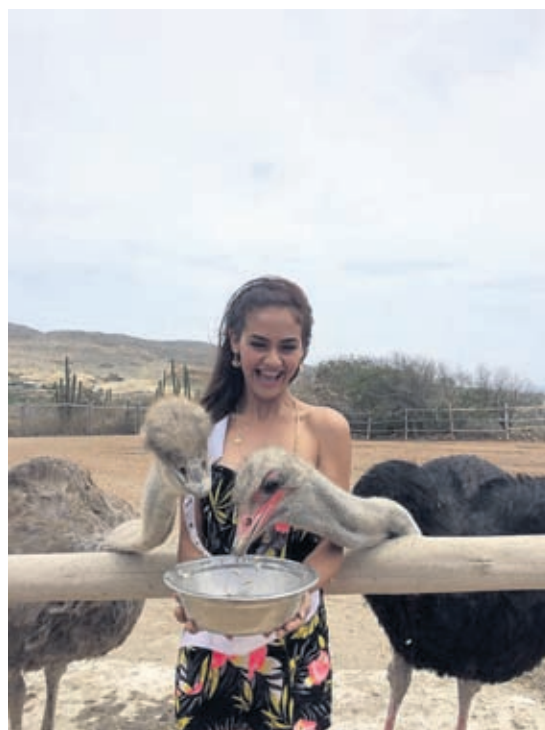
A.T.A., AAA, AHATA and associates in the industry will continue to work together to achieve recovery and growth in each market.



The Ostrich Farm

Matividiri – One of the most entertaining vacation activities is a visit to the Ostrich Farm, a popular stopover on most island jeep tours.

Locals and visitors enjoy the guided ostrich tour at the farm and features a well-stocked locally crafted and produced Art Boutique. The highlight of the visit is always the fun interaction with the resident ostriches and emus, including a trip to the incubators and the bird kindergarten, housing baby ostriches, baby emus, chicken and ducks, and even a land turtle!



It was a National Geographic moment when on cue Mr. Ostrich flapped his wings excitedly and poked around the ground with his bill, triggering Mrs. Ostrich who ran around in circles, flapped her wings and also poked around, before collapsing on the ground in a heap of feathers, allowing him to mount her, shaking, winding and spiraling his head in all direction!

Mr. Ostrich concluded his unexpected performance with a loud honking, his eyes rolling, then got up in a huff to nonchalantly strut away, leaving his wife and the scrutiny of our cameras.

It was a surprise reality TV moment, and not usually included in the regular program. Feeding the Ostriches is however always on the program, and they are eternally hungry, and fun!

Tours are available daily every half hour from 10–3pm. No reservations needed for small groups.

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Aruba Tourism Authority honored loyal visitors at Eagle Aruba Beach Resort



The Aruba Tourism Authority recently recognized the Goodwill Ambassadors of Aruba. Presenting the Ambassador with the Goodwill certification as a token of appreciation. The Emerald certification is granted to ambassadors to recognize, the loyalty, friendship, and visits to the island of Aruba. Goodwill Honoree has been choosing Aruba as her preferred vacation destination for more than 20 years consecutively. The Honoring certification program has three levels, which are divided according to the quantity of consecutive years visiting the island.

Honoring Levels:

- Distinguished Ambassadors: 10> years
- Goodwill Ambassadors: 20> years
- Emerald Ambassadors: 35> years

Honorees were:

Goodwill Ambassadors 20> years:

Patricia Ann Lehman resident of New York, United States (have been com-

ing for 30 years).

Ms. Olga Ruiz representing the Aruba Tourism Authority, and members of Eagle Aruba Resort bestowed the certification of the Emerald Ambassadors. The honoree was presented with the Goodwill Ambassador Certificate and memorable gifts.

On behalf of the Aruba Government, we would like to express our gratitude and appreciation to Mrs. Lehman. Thank you for making Aruba your favored vacation destination for so many years. We are so honored to have had such a wonderful visitor over all these years! Aruba is without a doubt your home away from home!

Top reason for returning to Aruba, provided by the honoree was:

Mrs. Patricia Lehman reasons:

1. Friendly people
2. Weather
3. Nice beaches
4. Good restaurants
5. Home away from home

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"How to empower women through innovation" A dialogue organized by the University of Aruba and the Government of Aruba

ORANJESTAD – On March 2, 2023, the Prime Minister of Aruba, Evelyn Wever-Croes, spoke at the special event held by the University of Aruba, How to empower women through innovation, in connection with International Women's Day.

Since the theme was "How to empower women through innovation", the University of Aruba and the Government organized a dialogue with different students of the University of Aruba and from the community to talk about the "position of women and digitalization."

It is no secret that the University recently started the SISSTEM faculty, which will prepare the next generation for future jobs in which digitalization plays an important role. There are still



more questions about what else we can do on this matter. Hence it was the main reason for the dialogue. During the session, they talked about some aspects of the law, legislation, and policy, but also about the essential role of the parents whose children use social media.

The dialogue led to various recommendations in which direction the Government should put more attention to innovation policy for the future.

"I thank Mrs. Viola Heutger, rector of the UA, Mrs. Deborah Alexander, and Mrs. Charisse Hoen, who took the responsibility to coordi-



nate this morning and the entire team of the UA for organizing such a beautiful and successful event in which I, carrier of innovation had the opportunity to

share my ideas and listen to the students and the teachers' opinion in all the areas that represent the UA" the Prime Minister expressed. □



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Aruba Today is delighted to share to its readers a new segment called "Beauty and the Beach", where we take a minute to honor our guests who have decided to spend their vacation on our beautiful and warm island.

In this edition, we'd like to give a shout out to **Heather Cox and friends from Ohio, USA**. Heather told us she loves the freedom to explore the island and the safety. Aruba is always proud to host all families and guests. We at Aruba Today encourage any visitor of the island to send in their pictures and/or messages; who knows? You might get on the cover!







Sea turtle conservation by Turtugaruba Foundation

ORANJESTAD — Turtugaruba was founded on September 3rd, 2003 by a group of enthusiastic volunteers. Ten years earlier, in 1993, a Sea Turtle Recovery Action Plan (STRAP) was introduced in Aruba and the rest of the Caribbean as an initiative of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). Tom Barmes, who was working at DLVV (Department of Agriculture, Husbandry and Fishery) was one of the writers of the STRAP for Aruba, together with Karen Eckert, director of WIDECAST (Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network). This is how sea turtle conservation started on the island following a plan that is still complied with today.

Tom formed a group of volunteers around him, because nature does not know office hours, like an organization such as DLVV. This group of volunteers used the name Widecast Aruba and today there are still a few of them active. They first started protecting the Leatherback Sea Turtle nests on Palm Beach and Eagle Beach. This group also investigated which other species of sea turtles use Aruba as their nesting habitat and which beaches are used by them. For a period of 25 years a study has been conducted in which every early morning the beach was being monitored in which now there is a good overview of sea turtle nesting activities.

There are 4 different sea turtle species that visit Aruba to lay their eggs, each with their own specific season:

- Leatherback Sea Turtle - Lederschildpad - Driekiel (March – September)
- Loggerhead Sea Turtle - Dikkopschildpad - Cawama (May – September)
- Hawksbill Sea Turtle - Karetschildpad - Caret (June – December)
- Green Turtle - Soepschildpad - Turtuga Blanco (July-November)

There also came a better understanding and overview of the biggest threats to the sea turtles existence in Aruba and how these problems should be tackled. Despite hard work, all those years, most problems have not really gone away, but luckily and thanks to the enormous efforts from the volunteers, the sea turtles are still



here. On Aruba the sea turtles are threatened with extinction by pollution, driving on dunes and beaches with quads and 4x4's and the loss of nesting beaches due to coastal development on behalf of tourism. Because coastal development comes with artificial light and artificial light is a mayor issue for sea turtles, mother turtle usually comes on shore at night looking for a dark beach to make her nest. However... a dark beach is hard to find here nowadays. Light causes stress and can result in her returning to the sea without laying her eggs. Artificial light causes disorientation for the baby sea turtles (hatchlings).

They crawl towards artificial light sources (like streetlights, hotel lights, etc.) and then they don't find the sea. In the 90's it was still a common occurrence to find a complete nest of about 70 hatchlings on the streets, dead, as cars drove over them. Thanks to their protection methods and a lot of time and effort, the vol-

unteers of Turtugaruba have managed to get this under control. But for a sustainable solution there must be less light visible on the beaches and a strict regulation of it. Sea turtles simply need dark nesting beaches for their survival. It is clear that even more coastal development would not make the situation better for the sea turtles. Again, more hotel rooms? And even busier beaches? These are choices Aruba has to make. Do we want to leave a place for the sea turtles? Not only Aruba, but the entire world needs sea turtles! Sea turtles play a vital role in keeping our oceans healthy.

The Green Turtle, for example, keeps the sea grasses on the bottom of the sea short and therefore a healthy place for many fish to deposit their eggs. The Leatherback, the largest turtle of the world, eats mainly jellyfish and helps maintain the balance between jellyfish and plankton. Despite the threats that exist on Aruba, the turtles still keep coming. That's why today Turtugaruba is especially proud of the volunteers and the many people and organizations of our community that carry a warm place in their hearts for the sea turtles. All four species are active now, which means all hands on deck in the field for us, the volunteers. We strive to keep the sea turtles, our oldest 'repeat guests', always coming back to Aruba and get the chance to reproduce here.

What you can do to protect the sea turtles

- Lights out for sea turtles.
- Do not drive on beaches.
- Do not litter. Do not leave any plastic cups, straws or bags on the beach.
- Remove obstacles from the beach.
- Do not disturb a nesting sea turtle. Do not attempt to touch the turtle but stay at a respectful distance (at least 10 meters).
- Do call Turtugaruba (24 hour Turtle Hotline: (297) 5929393).

For more information visit the facebook page Turtugaruba Foundation.



The Education Shop on equality between men and women

(Oranjestad)—As it is already known, the International Women's Day celebrated every March 8th has the purpose to promote equality for women in all walks of life and to also put an end to gender violence. It is no secret that there lies a difference between the education of young boys and young girls in our culture.

Our reporter approached the Education Shop to explain a bit about how education in our culture is different for boys and girls. Romyko Winklaar, director of the Education Shop, along with social work intern Elisa Zievinger shared that it is true that there exists a culture on Aruba where boys are considered to have more freedom than girls.

"Every year we see boys get in trouble with the law, for example. Girls too, but the rates are much lower. This is because boys' brains develop much later compared to girls'," he stated. Furthermore, it has been noted that more young women are continuing their studies after high school and are going further in life compared to young men. This is considered an emancipation of sorts, where key positions are taken by women, or new positions are being filled by women. Aruba has the example of the prime minister, who is the first female prime minister in Aruban political history.

However, Aruba mirrors South America in terms of the "Machismo" (Manliness) that plays a huge role in family dynamics, as Winklaar stated. Many times, men have more to say than women, men have more sexual partners and even more families. "That is what the children see, but we have to consider that when a mother is left with the children, she takes on the primary role as parent, a position which should be filled equally by both mother and father."

But often times we see absent father within the family dynamic: they go to work and then they go



drink at bars with friends or go do their hobbies and are barely home. As a result, the mother is left with the task of taking care of the children. Often times "machista" men are raised largely by just their mothers and "it is the mother herself who creates their mentally, because there is no father present to correct or guide the children. However, fathers often do permit certain things for boys especially, and that is where we the differences in how boys and girls are raised," he expressed.

It is normal for us to see young boys of 16 and 17 years of age partying around, but in terms of girls of the same age, they do not have the same type

of freedom. "We often ask ourselves: How can that be? This isn't normal. There is a big gap between boys and girls but we are seeing girls having a bit more freedom at a younger age."

In terms of development, it has been observed that girls are receiving their first sets of rules at an even younger age—at 9 or 10 years old, when it used to be 13 or 14 years old. Nowadays, girls are not only developing faster physically, but also mentally, and young girls are often much more mature than their male counterpart.

Furthermore, there has been a shift in career paths, where once it was common for young men to choose careers where

they would be performing "heavy" physical activity, and young women to choose "softer" careers in sales or office work. However, young women are slowly also choosing heavy careers too, like construction.

Both men and women have work within the household. However in Aruba, there is the tendency to see children being raised without a father. However, there has been a rise in mothers abandoning their children with their father. "We can call these children emotional orphans. We are seeing a transition from absent father being seen as normal to a new shift where roles are reversed, because men have more

work now. We have to put more emphasis on this so we can help the children," he stated.

For this, Winklaar thinks we need to take a step back and consider what is equality? What are the things that need to be brought forth in order to achieve it? "Don't we want to be treated equally? Don't we treat others equally? Where it's frowned upon for young women to do certain things young men do, it's important that we give them a fair chance, regardless of gender. It's important to give them a chance to grow in life and to experience professional success; to give them the freedom to choose and to guide them when needed." Winklaar finalized.

Education of gender equality does not mean ignoring the differences between men and women in terms of physique, but these differences are not sufficient grounds to base their rights, chances at opportunities and decisions solely because of their sex and gender.

That's why it is important for parents to try to implement values of equality and respect within the household, to allow their kids to choose their own paths, to allow boys to be vulnerable. We have to also give girls more access to more resources, especially technology, and it is important that parents stand up against discriminatory attitudes, sexism and lack of respect. □



CROSSWORD

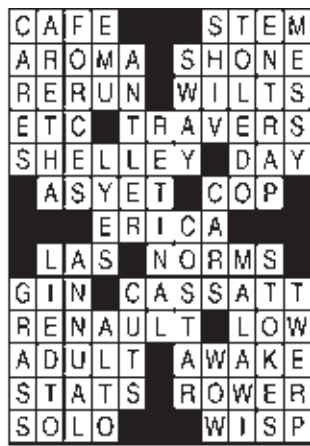
By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

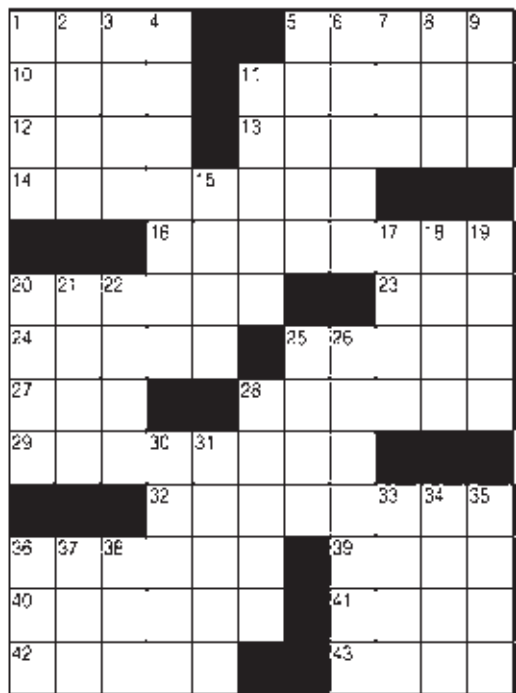
- 1 Borscht veggie
- 5 True
- 10 Different
- 11 Not round-about
- 12 Government agent
- 13 On cloud nine
- 14 Many a Manx
- 16 Table protector
- 20 Sign up
- 23 Injury soother
- 24 Track contests
- 25 Divine nourishment
- 27 Can. neighbor
- 28 Fat pig
- 29 Boater, e.g.
- 32 Booster of bad cholesterol
- 36 Shade trees
- 39 Valiant sort
- 40 Relaxed
- 41 Singer Redding
- 42 Brewing need
- 43 Bankrolls

DOWN

- 1 "Little Women" sister
- 2 Sailors' saint
- 3 Jacob's twin
- 4 Sawbuck
- 5 Sachet scent
- 6 Give a speech
- 7 Nonetheless
- 8 King's topper
- 9 British co. abbr.
- 11 Car sticker
- 15 Building wings
- 17 Stole stuff
- 18 Skin woe
- 19 Sign of sorrow
- 20 Aussie birds
- 21 High home
- 22 Bring up
- 25 Sound of agony
- 26 Gallery event
- 28 Aspect
- 30 One of the Titans
- 31 Take by force
- 33 Goat cheese
- 34 Like the
- 35 Throw
- 36 Spring month
- 37 Piggied out
- 38 Stew sphere



Yesterday's answer



3-9

AXYDLBAAXR
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

3-9

CRYPTOQUOTE

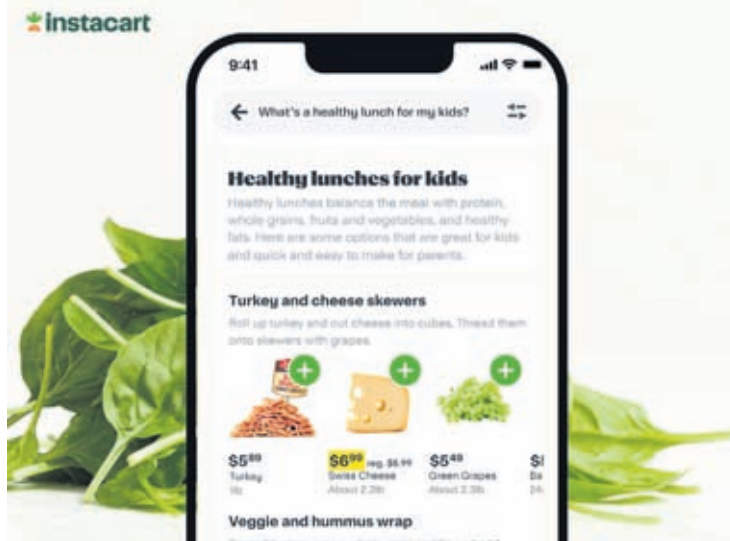
SYV'GK AYZ ZY OVED YTT

BPNTTL XPP ZIK ZNFK XHM

WVNPM SYVJ CNHAL YH ZIK

CXS MYCH. — JXS WJXMWVJS

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: A GOOD WRITER POSSESSES NOT ONLY HIS OWN SPIRIT BUT ALSO THE SPIRIT OF HIS FRIENDS. — FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE



This illustration released by Instacart depicts the grocery delivery company's app which can integrate ChatGPT to answer customers' food questions.

Associated Press

From marketing to design, brands adopt AI tools despite risk

By MATT O'BRIEN and HALE-LUYA HADERO

AP Technology Writers

Even if you haven't tried artificial intelligence tools that can write essays and poems or conjure new images on command, chances are the companies that make your household products are already starting to do so.

Mattel has put the AI image generator DALL-E to work by having it come up with ideas for new Hot Wheels toy cars. Used vehicle seller CarMax is summarizing

thousands of customer reviews with the same "generative" AI technology that powers the popular chatbot ChatGPT. Meanwhile, Snapchat is bringing a chatbot to its messaging service. And the grocery delivery company Instacart is integrating ChatGPT to answer customers' food questions. Coca-Cola plans to use generative AI to help create new marketing content. And while the company hasn't detailed exactly how it plans to deploy the technology, the move reflects the growing pressure on businesses to harness tools that many of their employees and consumers are already trying on their own.

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ST P
Violence Against Women

Skynyrd member's death signals end of era for Southern rock

By **BEN FINLEY**
Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) —

Lynyrd Skynyrd guitarist Gary Rossington, who died Sunday, made it big when rock 'n' roll was still a defining cultural force on par with today's TikTok trends and superhero movies.

The iconic band's last surviving co-founder was also perhaps the last flagpole in a once-powerful part of American music: Southern rock. Or at least a rebellious version of it that later became loosely tied to conservative politics and didn't shy away from some of the problematic symbols of the South.

"They're the band that sort of codified a lot of what we think of as Southern rock," said Stephen Thomas Erlewine, a music critic who writes for AllMusic, Pitchfork and Rolling Stone.

Lynyrd Skynyrd sang about Southern life while playing a form of muscular and gritty blues rock. The music could be raw or bloom into an extended guitar solo, like on their anthem "Free Bird."

But the Lynyrd Skynyrd of 2023 bears little resemblance to the one of nearly 50 years prior, when the original incarnation featured a group of long-haired musicians who fit into the American counterculture and were certainly not embraced by Nixon-era Republicans, Erlewine said.

The band's use of the Confederate flag back then was seen as "part of their rebellious streak," Erlewine said. They didn't really view the battle flag "as insurrectionist or pro-slavery, but more as garden variety rebellion," he said.

In more recent decades, though, the band came to represent a more specific brand of politics, especially after the distinctions between Southern rock and country blurred and their audiences mixed.

Some of the band's current members have been openly political. Last year, current lead vocalist Johnny Van Zant penned a song with his brother Donnie apart from the band



The band Lynyrd Skynyrd, from left, Gary Rossington, Billy Powell, Artimus Pyle, Ed King and Bob Burns appear backstage after being inducted at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in New York on March 13, 2006.

Associated Press

that praised Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a potential Republican presidential candidate in 2024. Erlewine said the band's sound and that of Southern rock in general eventually became "a sort of Red State, old-fashioned rock."

The original members of Lynyrd Skynyrd, which released its first album in 1973, had an intense musical chemistry and were harder and grittier than other groups lumped under the Southern rock banner, such as The Allman Brothers Band and The Marshall Tucker Band.

They came to have three guitarists, whose layers produced a thick, brawny sound that could become "a locomotive for solos," Erlewine said.

But the label "Southern rock" was nebulous at best, said Alan Paul, a music journalist who interviewed Rossington several times for Guitar World and for his upcoming book, "Brothers and Sisters: The Allman Brothers Band and the Inside Story of the Album That Defined the '70s."

The most accurate way to describe the genre shaped by wide-ranging influences "would be rock bands who sounded distinctly Southern they didn't hide anything about their Southernness," Paul said.

The Georgia-based Allman Brothers Band hated the term, Paul said, because it was too reductive. But Lynyrd Skynyrd embraced the Southern rock label "to the point of making people uncomfortable," Paul said. The Florida band's pervasive "Sweet Home Alabama" was a response to Neil Young's "Alabama" and "Southern Man," which rebuked slavery in the South. The song name-checks Young and obliquely references Alabama Gov. George Wallace, a staunch segregationist who later softened his views.

The band's original lead singer and songwriter, Ronnie Van Zant, claimed the reference wasn't supporting Wallace.

"A lot of people believed in segregation and all that. We didn't. We put the 'boo, boo, boo' there saying, 'We don't like Wallace,'" Rossington concurred, in a documentary interview.

But Paul said he doesn't really believe that "I don't think most people do." Paul cites a memoir written by the band's original manager, Alan Walden, who said Ronnie Van Zant was "a Wallace man all the way." And yet Erlewine also points out that Van Zant wrote a 1975 song, "Saturday Night Special," that subtly questioned the uses of hand-

guns.

"There was definitely a reactionary conservatism in parts of Skynyrd, but they could not be seen strictly in terms of what you would think of as conservative politics," Erlewine said of their first incarnation.

A 1977 plane crash killed Ronnie Van Zant, guitarist Steve Gaines and backing vocalist Cassie Gaines and injured Rossington. The band reformed a decade later with Johnny Van Zant taking his older brother's role. Rossington was among the returning members and, as the lineup continued to change, would remain.

It was this reconstituted version of Lynyrd Skynyrd that seemed to really embrace a more conservative image, Erlewine and Paul each said.

In the 1990s, the group's audiences began to overlap with those of Hank Williams Jr. and Charlie Daniels, a Southern rock pioneer whose sound became more country.

"A lot of the sounds that were progressive in the '70s and rock-based became incorporated into country music, and became the sound of country music," Erlewine said. "Lynyrd Skynyrd doesn't really play country music but there's an overlap between the

audiences ... it all becomes sort of like a certain kind of Southern music."

He added: "Certain images, certain sounds, certain ideas were set in place. And it's easier to keep playing to that stuff, because that's where the audience is."

The still touring Lynyrd Skynyrd regularly used the Confederate battle flag in their live shows for decades. Rossington told CNN in 2012 that the band would stop using the flag because of its association with hate groups, but then walked back the comment to say they would continue to use it, alongside the state flag of Alabama and the American flag.

These days, musicians who could be seen as honoring the cultural and musical ideas of 1970s Southern rock and building upon them tend to be more progressive politically, Erlewine said. They include Jason Isbell and groups such as the Tedeschi Trucks Band and the Drive-By Truckers who've also sung about life in the South.

The Truckers' 2001 album "Southern Rock Opera" examined misconceptions about the South, Lynyrd Skynyrd's legend and Wallace's legacy, among other things.

"I was a (Skynyrd) fan in elementary school, which is when they were actually making records," the band's Patterson Hood told The Associated Press in 2002, saying he rediscovered a love for their music after buying a vinyl copy of the pre-crash double live set "One More for the Road" years later.

"After the crash, I didn't really care for the other Southern rock being made at that time," Hood said. "A lot of Southern rock took a right-wing direction after the plane crash."

In the span of half a century, Lynyrd Skynyrd morphed from playing pivotal rock 'n' roll into a near tribute band to itself. They were rebellious longhairs who became entrenched in a culture aligned with the conservative establishment. □

Slap fighting: The next big thing, or unsporting stupidity?

By **MARK ANDERSON**

AP Sports Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The competitors stand rigidly upright with their hands behind their backs, waiting to absorb a brutal slap to the face.

When the open-handed blow is delivered, there's a sharp report and the reaction can be dramatic. Some fighters barely move, while others stumble backward or fall to the floor. Some are knocked out.

UFC President Dana White is selling slap fighting as the next big thing in combat sports, putting his money and the resources of one of the world's foremost mixed martial arts organizations behind the Power Slap League. The Nevada Athletic Commission has sanctioned the league for competitions in Las Vegas. "It's a home run," said White, who is among several UFC officials involved in the league.

Some slap-fighting beat-downs have gone viral, including a video from eastern Europe showing a man who continues to compete even as half of his face swells to seemingly twice its size. Such exposure has led to questions about the safety of slap fighting, particularly the risk of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, a degenerative brain disease believed to be caused by repeated blows to the head. A former chairman of the commission, which regulates combat sports in Nevada, says approving the league was a mistake.

Chris Nowinski, cofounder and CEO of the Concussion Legacy Foundation, agrees, calling slap fighting "one of the stupidest things you can do."

"There's nothing fun, there's nothing interesting and there's nothing sporting," Nowinski said. "They're trying to dress up a really stupid activity to try to make money."

White and the competitors remain unfazed, comparing commentary on slapping to the negative reaction the UFC faced in its infancy more than 20 years



In this photo provided by Zuffa LLC, Ryan Phillips slaps Rob Perez at a Power Slap event in Las Vegas, March 31, 2022.

ago.

"I think it's definitely overblown with the topics of CTE and the damage that we're taking," said Ryan Phillips, a Power Slap League fighter. "I think a lot of people still just don't understand that it's still a slap."

Concerns about concussions leading to CTE, which can cause violent mood swings, depression and memory loss, aren't confined to combat sports. The disease has shown up in the brains of former rugby players, and the NFL and college football have taken steps to cut down on blows to the head by changing rules regarding tackling and other hits. CTE can only be detected during an autopsy.

Despite the naysayers, White said he believes slap fighting will follow a similar trajectory to mixed martial arts, which the late Sen. John McCain referred to as "human cockfighting" in 1996, when the UFC didn't have weight classes or many rules. McCain's criticism helped force the organization to become more structured, leading to its widespread acceptance.

White said the ratings of the TBS reality show "Power Slap: Road to the Title" bear out the early popularity of what to many is still a curiosity.

White said he realized there could be a market for the sport in the U.S. when he clocked the millions of YouTube views of slap fighting videos from eastern Europe in 2017 and 2018. The videos were often poorly produced, the slap matches unregulated. White became convinced that fights with written rules and shot with professional video equipment could convert many internet viewers into dedicated, paying fans. The Nevada commission gave slap fighting some much needed legitimacy when it unanimously sanctioned the sport in October and a month later awarded White a license to promote it.

But White's enterprise was hampered when he was captured on video slapping his wife on New Year's Eve. White apologized, but has acknowledged it damaged efforts to get the league off the ground. White is no newcomer to controversy: Former UFC fighters Kajan Johnson and Clarence Dollaway filed a lawsuit in 2021 against Endeavor, the organization's parent company, alleging that UFC takes an inordinate share of the profits. But White is charging ahead.

Three qualifying events have taken place at the UFC Apex in Las Vegas, ahead of the March 11

telecast on the streaming platform Rumble in which champions will be crowned in four weight classes.

Power Slap fights are typically three to five rounds. The fighters take turns hitting each other in the face with an open hand, and those on the receiving end stand with their hands behind their backs. A fighter has up to 60 seconds to recover and respond after receiving a blow. Fighters can earn up to 10 points based on the effectiveness of the slap and the defender's reaction.

Fights can end in a decision, knockout, technical knockout or disqualification, such as for an illegal slap. All slaps are subject to video review. Each event has two referees and three judges.

Also present are a supervising doctor and a physician or physician's assistant, plus three EMTs and three ambulances. White has touted the safety record of the UFC, but has not talked specifically about injuries in the Power Slap League.

White says slap fighting is safer than boxing or mixed martial arts because each contestant usually takes only three blows per bout. In boxing, White said, that number could be 400 or more, and that doesn't include the shots taken during sparring. There is no sparring in slap fighting, he

noted.

Nowinski of the concussion foundation said while there may be no sparring in practice sessions, that doesn't mean it doesn't happen elsewhere. He said comparing boxing to power slapping is misleading because slap fighters take a full blow each time.

"You can slip (boxing) punches," Nowinski said. But in slap fighting "you're taking out everything that's interesting to watch and everything sporting (from boxing) and just doing the brain damage part."

Nowinski said slap fighters don't make enough money to justify the risk. The Power Slap League wouldn't disclose how much it pays fighters, but said in a statement that participants are compensated for every match and can also earn "appearance fees" and "additional discretionary bonuses."

Stephen J. Cloobek, who was chairman of the state commission when it sanctioned slap fighting, said White and former UFC CEO Lorenzo Fertitta sold him on the legitimacy of the sport. "I made a mistake," Cloobek said. "I'm not happy about it."

The commission recently approved amended rules to better define what constitutes a legal slap in an effort to minimize serious injuries.

"The No. 1 thing is the health and safety of the fighter," commission Chairman Anthony Marnell III said at a Feb 15 meeting. "Always has been, always will be."

But he went on to say: "It seems like there is a market for this, whether you like it or not."

Phillips, the slap fighter, said participants can defend themselves without losing points, such as rolling away before the hand makes impact.

And the fighters know if they lose the coin toss and get slapped first, it will hurt. "I know what's coming," fighter Vernon Cathey said. "I'm tensing up. There's a lot of stuff I can do to protect myself." □

Analysis: Daniel Jones' new contract raises standard for QBs

By **ROB MAADDI**
AP Pro Football Writer

Daniel Jones turned one decent season into a mega-money contract that raises the standard in the NFL.

Once the New York Giants gave Jones a deal worth \$160 million over four years \$82 million is reportedly guaranteed for the first two seasons the price tag went up for quarterbacks around the league. Way up.

If Jones can join Patrick Mahomes, Josh Allen and six others in the \$40 million-per-year club after a breakout season in which he threw just 15 touchdown passes and ran for seven more, how much money will more accomplished QBs get paid?

Before last season, the Gi-



New York Giants quarterback Daniel Jones plays during an NFL divisional round playoff football game, Saturday, Jan. 21, 2023, in Philadelphia.

Associated Press

ants declined to give Jones his fifth-year option at \$22.3 million. Now, they're pay-

ing him like a superstar after he helped lead them to a 9-7-1 record and their first

playoff appearance since 2016.

But Jones was essentially a

game manager who protected the football. His best performance came in a playoff win at Minnesota that was followed by a dud in a season-ending loss at Philadelphia.

Only Aaron Rodgers has an average annual salary of \$50 million per year. Lamar Jackson, Jalen Hurts and Joe Burrow should be next considering what Jones got from the Giants.

Jackson, the 2019 NFL MVP, received a nonexclusive franchise tag from the Baltimore Ravens so he'll make \$32.4 million this season a bargain compared to Jones if he doesn't sign a long-term deal. He doesn't have an agent who could've already finished what's become a drawn-out process.

Jackson can negotiate with other teams when free agency begins next week. The Ravens can match his best offer or they could take two first-round draft picks in return.

Jackson, who turned 26 in January, is 45-16 in four seasons with the Ravens. He's 1-3 in the playoffs but already is one of six quarterbacks in NFL history with 10,000 yards passing and 4,000 rushing.

Hurts is eligible for a contract extension this offseason after leading the Eagles to the Super Bowl. He was runner-up to Patrick Mahomes for AP NFL MVP and was a finalist for Offensive Player of the Year after totaling 35 touchdowns, throwing for 3,701 yards and running for 760.

In Philadelphia's 38-35 loss to Mahomes and the Chiefs in the Super Bowl, Hurts had one of the best all-around games ever seen on football's biggest stage.

He completed 71% of his passes for 304 yards and one TD, and ran for 70 yards and three scores.

A reasonable starting point for his contract negotiations would be Kyler Murray's deal — \$230.5 million over five years.

"Tremendous respect for him as a player, as a person," Eagles general manager Howie Roseman said of Hurts. □



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